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“The Fashion of Online Learning Adoption in Australian Universities”

Jonathan Pratt
School of Management,
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia
Email: Jonathan.Pratt@uts.edu.au

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The Fashion of Online Learning Adoption in Australian Universities

Abstract

During the 1990s, many Australian universities uncritically adopted problematic and unproven online learning technologies, leading to wasted resources, unfulfilled expectations and in some cases, program and organisational failure. Given that limited theoretical and empirical explanations have addressed this important research problem, this paper discusses and applies a management fashion framework to this research problem and concludes that online learning technologies could be conceptualised as a management fashion, following the empirical work of Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999).

The Research Problem

In the 1990s, a number of alternative strategies for delivering higher education became more accessible to universities. These new approaches emerged at a time when universities viewed themselves in competition for student customers and faced real shortages of necessary resources (Marginson, 1997). The pursuit of online learning, defined as courses in which units or subjects are delivered and interactions between staff and students are conducted via the internet (Bell *et al.*, 2002: ix), apparently came to be seen by executives as a panacea for “meeting the needs of the worker-student, providing ‘more’ educational opportunities to ‘more’ students at ‘less’ cost” (Tapsall and Ryan, 1999: 149).

Online learning technology was accompanied by promises of increased competitiveness in overseas markets (Baldwin, 1991, Johnson *et al.*, 1992, Lundin, 1993, Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1994, Tinkler *et al.*, 1994, James and Beattie, 1995, Hesketh *et al.*, 1996, Taylor *et al.*, 1996, Yetton *et al.*, 1997, McCann *et al.*, 1998, McNaught *et al.*, 2000), improved efficiency of government and university spending (Baldwin, 1991, Johnson *et al.*, 1992, Hamer, 1993, Jevons and

Northcott, 1994, Taylor, 1992, Cochrane *et al.*, 1993, Lundin, 1993, Taylor *et al.*, 1993, Alexander and McKenzie, 1998, McNaught *et al.*, 2000), enhanced quality of education (Baldwin, 1991, Johnson *et al.*, 1992, Cochrane *et al.*, 1993, Lundin, 1993, Alexander and McKenzie, 1998, McNaught *et al.*, 2000, Tinkler *et al.*, 1994), as well as access to an international market in web-based training estimated to rise to \$5.5 billion in 2002 (Scott and Alexander, 2000).

Many of these reports and papers however, encouraged a cautious attitude towards much of this early research, especially in relation to claims of educational (Alexander, 1995, Caladine, 1993, Cochrane *et al.*, 1993, Taylor *et al.*, 1993, Tinkler *et al.*, 1994, James and Beattie, 1995, Phipps and Merisotis, 1999, Scott and Alexander, 2000, Brabazon, 2002) and cost effectiveness (Alexander, 1995, Caladine, 1993, Cochrane *et al.*, 1993, Tinkler *et al.*, 1994, Phipps and Merisotis, 1999, Scott and Alexander, 2000, Brabazon, 2002, Jevons and Northcott, 1994). In 1998, Alexander and McKenzie found empirical support for these early cautions and concluded that across 104 projects in 33 Australian universities, online learning had failed to deliver its promises of increased quality and productivity of learning for students (Alexander and McKenzie, 1998: 59).

Despite explicit warnings in much of the supporting research, Australian universities embraced online learning technology without critically evaluating this new technology (Yetton *et al.*, 1997). Yetton *et al.* (1997) investigated the management and introduction of technology in 20 Australian universities and found widespread lack of critical evaluation of these new technologies.

The project revealed relatively little formal evaluation of any kind, either before investments were made or afterward. Except for the most straightforward investments, which are analysed on the basis of discounted cash flow, the universities tended to rely on informal and intuitive approaches to the review and evaluation of current and proposed investments in information technology. Across the group of universities, academic and administrative staff alike are nevertheless confident that spending on IT has, overall, led to improved quality of teaching and learning and increased efficiency of operation. (Yetton et al., 1997: 81)

Brabazon (2002) proposed that Australian universities' failure to maintain a critical approach to the investigation and application of this technology (Brabazon, 2002: 61) led to wasted resources, unfulfilled expectations, and in some cases, program and organisational failure.

In the United States, Columbia University spent \$25 million on online learning technologies and later offered these courses for free as samples. The University of Carolina shut down its online divisions and NYUOnline closed after receiving \$25 million and enrolling only 500 students at its peak. The University of Maryland College ceased its online curriculum and went back to conventional curriculum and Temple University closed its Virtual Temple in 2001 (Hafner, 2002). US\$483 million was spent on companies building online materials for the education market in 2000. In 2002, this figure was reduced to US\$17million (Brabazon, 2002: 32).

In Europe, The London School of Economics no longer charges students for use of its E-Learning program, but now uses it to promote the traditional university environment (Hafner, 2002). E-University start-ups Scottish Knowledge and Fathom have also both shut down (The observatory on borderless higher education, 2004). On April 22, 2004, the Board of the Higher Education Funding Council for England announced that the future of UK eUniversities Worldwide (UKeU), the UK's national commercial online university, was unviable in its current guise as it had failed to meet its student recruitment targets. The university had agreements with 20 UK universities and offered 40 programs, most with a first intake date of mid-to-late 2004. After a three year recruitment drive, the university claimed to enroll only 900 students and spent 35 million pounds of public money (The observatory on borderless higher education, 2004).

In Australia, the University of Melbourne invested \$AUD 5 million of public funds into a private for profit speculative online venture, Universitas 21 (Senate Employment, 2001), however early negotiations with potential partner News Ltd failed (Centre for Studies in Higher Education, 2001), six universities

dropped out of the network, including founding member the University of Toronto (Young, 2001) and many unresolved issues of intellectual property, governance and the speed of planning continue to frustrate the project (Centre for Studies in Higher Education, 2001). The Global University Alliance has suffered similar setbacks with four institutions pulling out of the grouping, including Deakin University (Maslen, 2000). Deakin has since begun a new partnership, the World Alliance of Distance Education with the UK's Open University, The Open University of Hong Kong and Canada's Athabasca University (Madden, 2002). As of June 24, 2003, Universitas 21 was yet to enroll its first student (Maslen, 2002). It has been argued that there is little evidence to suggest that the fate of Universitas 21 and the Global University Alliance will be any different to the fate of other online learning ventures in the USA and Europe (The observatory on borderless higher education, 2004).

In March 2002, the first national attempt to assess the extent of online learning technologies in Australian universities was released (Bell *et al.*, 2002). In this study, the authors found that there were 207 fully online courses offered by 23 (52 percent) Australian universities.

These facts raise the important question of why so many Australian universities uncritically adopted problematic online learning technologies. What makes this research problem so interesting is that Australian universities charge large amounts of money teaching their students to develop competence in critical analysis, yet they appeared somewhat deficient in critically analysing online learning technologies (Yetton *et al.*, 1997, Brabazon, 2002).

At the present time, there are limited empirical and theoretical explanations addressing this important question. These papers explored various theoretical explanations using institutional theory (Pratt, 2003, 2004, Pratt and Alexander, 2004, Pratt and Johnston, 2003), power (Pratt, 2003, Pratt and Johnston, 2003), network theory (Pratt and Alexander, 2004), organisational economics (Pratt, 2003) and strategy (Pratt, 2003). This paper will investigate the merit and means by which management fashion theory might

address this research problem in order to guide future empirical research in this area. This paper will therefore discuss management fashion theory, its application in other empirical research, and finally its potential application to Australian universities.

The Theory of Management Fashion

Management fashion is a contemporary hybrid perspective that draws on new institutional theory, network theory and the diffusion of innovations literatures. This perspective attempts to address the question

When and by what processes are technically inefficient innovations diffused or efficient innovations rejected? (Abrahamson, 1991: 587)

It claims that in times of uncertainty, organisations may imitate each other and fashion setting organisations, such as consulting firms, business mass media etc., that set fashions for others (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1990, Abrahamson, 1991). Abrahamson argued that management fashion is both a process and an outcome, taking place when national norms of rationality and progress govern managerial behaviour (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). According to Abrahamson, a management fashion is

a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress (Abrahamson, 1996a: 257)

The management fashion setting community shapes the transitory collective beliefs among management fashion followers that certain techniques are rational and progressive among stakeholders (Abrahamson, 1996a: 263). This may or may not be technically accurate (Abrahamson, 1996a: 265). This community supplies the mass audiences with a limited set of innovations that may be taken up, depending on follower demand for them (Abrahamson, 1996a: 264). Members of this community might include management consultants, business schools, business press organisations, academic gurus, consultant gurus and hero managers (Abrahamson, 1996a: 64). There is also a political dimension with some organisations playing roles as active fashion setters where ambiguity coupled with must-do attitudes lead to new idea diffusions (Kieser, 1997).

Benders and van Keen note a major weakness in Abrahamson's conceptualisation of management fashion, that of 'interpretative viability' (Benders and van Keen, 2001: 34) They claimed that most concepts lack a material component and are therefore difficult to pinpoint their exact meaning, leading to a degree of conceptual ambiguity. This ambiguity actually helps to increase the size of the potential market as different buyers recognise their own situation in the description (Benders and van Keen, 2001: 37). The popular catchword can thus become decoupled and detached from the content the originators had in mind (Benders and van Keen, 2001: 39). Judging the efficacy of an innovation is claimed to be very difficult then, as per Abrahamson's efficient/inefficient thesis (Benders and van Keen, 2001: 49). Benders and van Keen suggest that this component needs to be added back into Abrahamson's definition, the only one known at this time (Benders and van Keen, 2001: 35). Benders and van Keen thus proposed a new definition of management fashion:

the patterns of production and consumption of temporarily intensive management discourse, and the organizational changes induced by and associated with this discourse (Benders and van Keen, 2001: 40)

The Application of Management Fashion

In seeking to demonstrate the utility of the management fashion perspective, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) sought to explain the diffusion of quality circles in the USA and entrepreneurs' discourse promoting or discouraging them (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 107). They claimed that management discourse matters as it shapes the diffusion of management techniques and triggers their diffusion (DiMaggio, 1988, Abrahamson, 1996b, Meyer, 1998, Lamertz and Baum, 1988, Jackson, 1996).

The authors claim that this was the first carefully documented study of why and when a single management fashion occurred and why it took the shape it did (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 710). Noting Strang and Meyer's (1993) criticisms of the network and diffusion literature, Abrahamson and Fairchild proposed that the production of discourse can promote the belief that entire categories of

organisations will benefit from the adoption of an innovation, thereby increasing the scope for its diffusion. Their study investigated the co-evolution of both adoption and theorisation.

Abrahamson and Fairchild found that the lifecycles of four management fads (job enrichment, quality circles, total quality management and business process engineering) were interdependent such that there was a clear tendency for the downswing of one to antedate an upswing in the next, argued to be an endogenous collapse trigger (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 723). Their results also indicated that global competition, as well as productivity and quality performance gaps and the surge in discourse that revealed them, were necessary and significant influences.

Discourse promoting quality circles tended to be particularly positive, emotionally charged, and unreasoned in the upswing (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 726). This discourse had three sub-discourses: the problem discourse, solution discourse and bandwagon discourse reports noting other organisation's adoption of the relevant innovation (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 726). In their study of quality circles in the USA, the problem discourse focused on the international threat from Japan, the solution discourse focused on how quality circles could help address this threat, and the bandwagons discourse investigated different adoption-related issues. Downswings were similarly more negative, less emotional and more carefully reasoned with solution discourses becoming more differentiated (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 729). These fragmented into debunking (rejection with no substitute), surfing (rejection of one to substitute to another) and sustaining (continued use of narrowing tactics, focus on implementation etc). Their study suggested that there was a rhetorical bandwagon pressure to adopt or reject new innovations which occurred because managers read discourse telling them that many other organisations were adopting this technique, encouraging them to uncritically 'jump on the bandwagon' (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 732). Thus discourse may have affected the speed and extent of the adoption and rejection as predicted by Strang and Meyer (1993).

Abrahamson and Fairchild concluded that three triggers needed to occur together in order to cause uncritical adoption among organisational decision makers: a fashion in that niche collapses, a widespread performance gap emerges that the fashion can address, and that this gap is brought to the collective attention of other organisations through discourse (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 723).

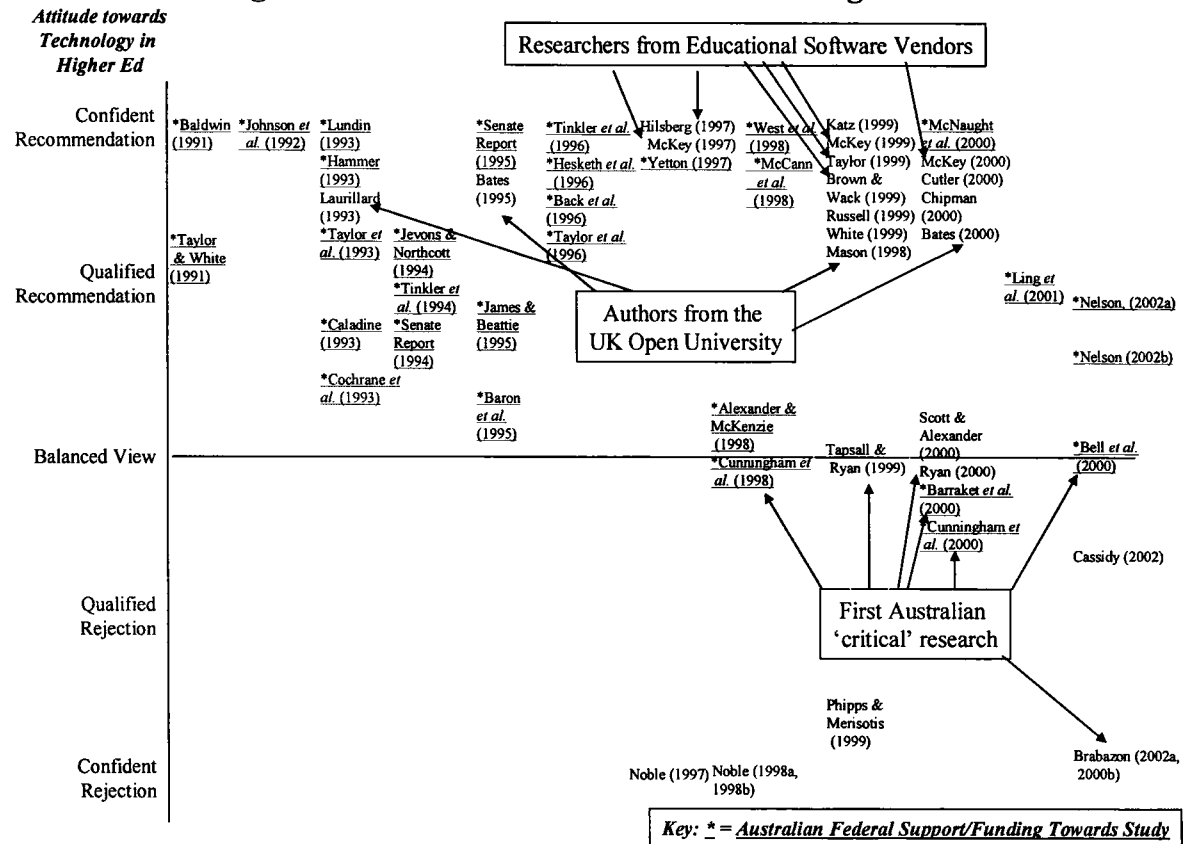
Management Fashion and Online Learning in Australian Universities

Management fads in education have been studied on other occasions (Birnbaum, 2000, Slavin, 1989, Newell *et al.*, 2001b). The findings of these studies resonate with the arguments of the management fashion perspective previously discussed. For example, Newell *et al.* argued that government funding of many studies in higher education can lead to the creation of management fads.

The outcome is that funding bodies may actually be encouraging the creation and diffusion of, at worst, ill-founded management fads, or at best, unsettled or contentious management concepts (Newell et al., 2001b: 117)

A management fashion perspective, applied to online learning in Australian higher education, would focus on adoption and adopters, rather than the innovation itself (Newell *et al.*, 2001a). Applying the management fashion perspective to the adoption of online learning technologies in Australian universities requires that online learning be successfully conceptualised as a management fashion. Such a task would be demonstrated by arguing that the discourse associated with online learning was relatively transitory (Abrahamson, 1996a), or temporarily intensive (Benders and van Keen, 2001), was disseminated by management fashion setters (Abrahamson, 1996a), was argued as rational management progress (Abrahamson, 1996a), and induced, or was associated with, university adoption.

Figure 1: Distribution of the Online Learning Discourse Over Time



Source: Adapted from Pratt and Johnston (2003)

Figure 1 above shows the distribution of the online learning discourse across time and attitude, as cited by Australian university adopters. One can observe that the number of reports grew over time from 1991, peaked around the year 2000, and then fell away quite sharply. This research was produced by the Australian Federal Government, educational software vendors and distance education universities, all of whom could be argued to be fashion setters for online learning. Further, consultancies like Katz and Associates (1999), and even brokers on Wall Street (Cassidy, 2002), could be argued to have influenced collective beliefs concerning the utility of adopting online learning technologies. Other potential fashion setters include:

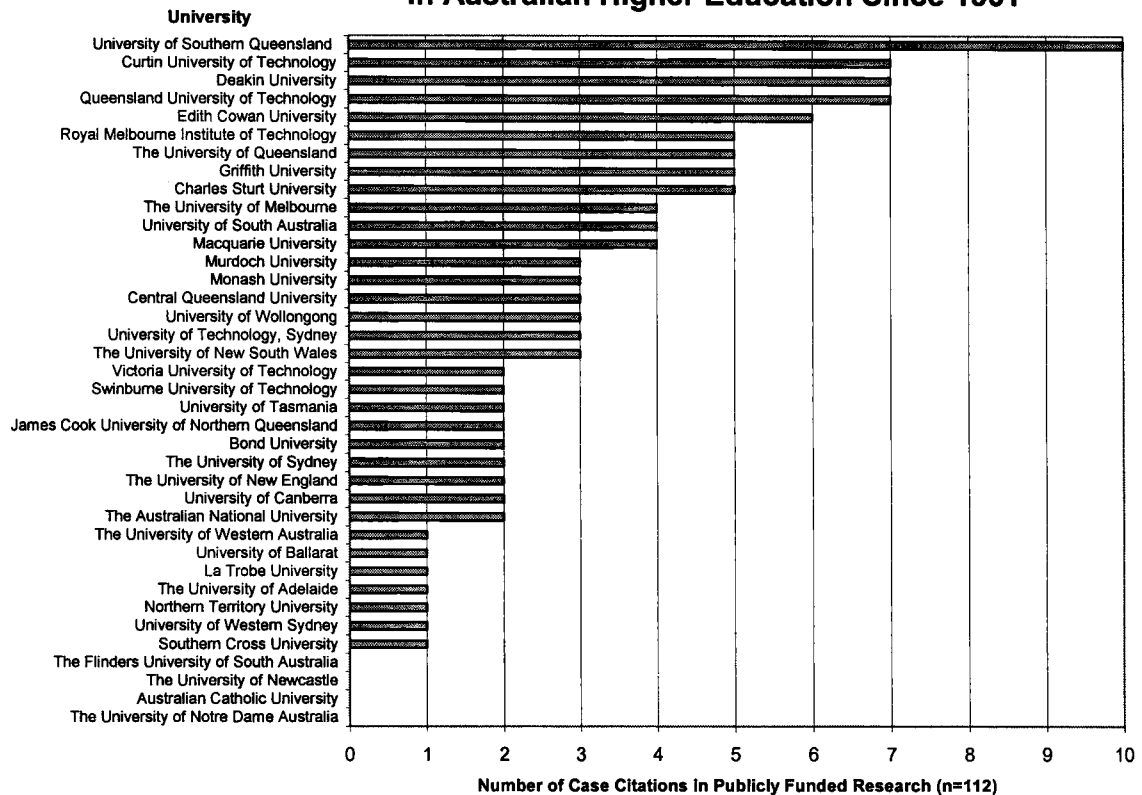
- The media (James and Beattie, 1995, Noble, 1997);

- Online education brokers (McKey, 1997, 1999, 2000);
- Technologists in the international (Laurillard, 1993, Bates, 1995, 2000, Noble, 1997, Mason, 1998) and national academy (Cuttler, 2001, Chipman, 2001a, 2001b); and
- The professions who demanded that Australian universities provide workplace training (Hesketh *et al.*, 1996)

Much of this research also appealed to notions of progress (such as increased competitiveness, educational productivity and learning outcomes) and equity for disadvantaged students (Baldwin, 1991, Johnson *et al.*, 1992, Hamer, 1993, Lundin, 1993, James and Beattie, 1995, Taylor *et al.*, 1996, Tinkler *et al.*, 1996, Tapsall and Ryan, 1999, Barraket *et al.*, 2000, McNaught *et al.*, 2000), thus also appealing to grander narratives of justice (Strang and Meyer, 1993) in Australia's higher education sector. This occurred despite criticisms from this same research base that online learning technologies were problematic (or inefficient) in their educational and cost effectiveness claims.

Further, drawing on Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), early discourse was particularly positive, labelled as "confident recommendation" on Figure 1. Whilst this research appealed to notions of rationality, it did not provide substantive support for many of its early claims. For example, much of the research in support of technology in higher education was overly-dependant on a small unrepresentative sample of university models. Figure 2 highlights the number of citations for each Australian university in the 15 most commonly cited empirical studies referred to in the literature.

Figure 2: University Citations in Publicly Funded Research in Australian Higher Education Since 1991



Source: Original Contribution

There was a distinct bias in the research towards citing universities with a history of distance education in studies focussed on technology application for ‘on-campus’ students. Across 15 publicly funded research studies, 41 per cent of a total of 112 case citations were drawn from only nine (24 per cent) universities that contributed material to the Open Learning Agency of Australia, including 7 of the former Distance Education Centres. If Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland are added to this group, both universities having a significant history of distance education, then this group of 11 (29 per cent) of universities would account for over half (52 per cent) of all citations since 1991. Thus, early empirical research claiming to support recommendations of online learning tended to rely on the

experiences of unrepresentative samples from which generalised conclusions were applied across the sector, resonating with Abrahamson and Fairchild's findings (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 726).

The early research in online learning also tended to fall into discourses related to the problem, solution and bandwagon groups (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999: 726). The problem and solution discourses tended to focus on increased competitiveness in overseas markets, improved efficiency of government and university spending, enhanced quality of education, as well as access to an international market in web-based training estimated to rise to \$5.5 billion in 2002. Bandwagon discourse focused on what other Australian universities were doing in relation to their adoption decisions, with a number of sectoral-level surveys periodically reproduced for this purpose (Cochrane *et al.*, 1993, Lundin, 1993, Tinkler *et al.*, 1994, James and Beattie, 1995, Taylor *et al.*, 1996, McCann *et al.*, 1998, McNaught *et al.*, 2000, Ling *et al.*, 2001)

It is difficult to determine how this literature may have affected university adoption decisions, as the survey conducted by Bell *et al.* (2002) was the first such national survey researching this question. It is interesting to note that the decision to adopt online learning was made by at least half of all Australian universities after a decade of intensive discourse in this area. What was subsequently discovered however, was that the adoption of online learning in Australian universities did not increase the quality of teaching or institutional productivity as expected, but did help to raise the innovative profile of adopting institutions (Alexander and McKenzie, 1998: 59). Alexander and McKenzie's research was conducted during 1994 and 1995 across 104 projects from 33 Australian universities that received funding from the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT). 104 institutional questionnaires were collected from which 20 university teaching projects were reviewed in greater depth and 8 became in depth-case studies. Alexander and McKenzie's (1998) conclusions were entirely consistent with the findings of Staw and Epstein's (2000) study of management fads in the largest US corporations.

Finally, the issue of what triggered the adoption of online learning could be visited by researching whether other trends in higher education had collapsed prior to online learning adoption. Some of these potential trends might include strategic planning, benchmarking, total quality management and business process re-engineering (Birnbbaum, 2000). There were also calls for universities to be more globally competitive through online learning (already noted), as well as many arguments made by the Australian Federal Government that Australian universities should improve their performance (Koutsoukis, 2002).

Conclusion

Many Australian universities uncritically adopted problematic online learning technologies during the 1990s, leading to wasted resources, unfulfilled expectations and in some cases, program and organisational failure. This paper has argued that the management fashion perspective could help direct attention to the role of fashion setters who disseminated temporarily intensive management discourses that influenced the adoption of Australian university providers. These discourses exemplified many of the characteristics of other management fashion studies, namely the influence of various management fashion setting organisations (e.g. the Australian Federal Government, educational software vendors and distance education universities, among others), appeals to rational notions of progress and justice, temporarily intensive publishing, unsubstantiated research claims and accompanying global competition and performance gap pressures.

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